



Precarious Futures: Mortality, Time, and Posthuman Ethics in Ishiguro's Recent Novels

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ABSTRACT

Kazuo Ishiguro's works, *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021), examine the moral implications of existing within frameworks that govern life through the passage of time. Both novels feature artificially created beings—human clones and Artificial Friends—whose destinies are influenced by institutional, technological, and economic dynamics that restrict personal freedom and ethical acknowledgment. This article investigates how Ishiguro depicts mortality, obsolescence, and emotional labor as forms of control that generate what could be termed precarious futurity. Utilizing theories of biopolitics, posthuman ethics, and temporality, the article contends that Ishiguro critiques societies that normalize exploitation by presenting it as advancement, care, or necessity. In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones adopt identities tied to their roles as donors, altering their perspectives on selfhood, intimacy, and mortality. In *Klara and the Sun*, Klara's value is based on her emotional expressiveness and her ability to be technologically replaced. Through a comparative examination, the article underscores Ishiguro's appeal for a broader ethical understanding that acknowledges care, vulnerability, and moral agency outside the confines of biological humanism.

1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction often explores memory, loss, and the delicate nature of human identity. In novels like *The Remains of the Day* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, he looks at how people find



meaning within strict social structures. In *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021), these themes are presented in posthuman stories. The main characters in these novels are not entirely human biologically, but they show deep emotions, ethical understanding, and the ability to care. Still, they live in systems that take away their control over their own futures.

A key aspect of both novels is how time acts as a source of power. Time doesn't just serve as a neutral backdrop; it becomes a tool that regulates and assigns value to lives. In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones grow up knowing—slowly revealed—that their lives will end early due to organ donation. Their future is not something they can shape; it's something they must endure. In *Klara and the Sun*, Klara's existence is affected by the fear of becoming outdated. Her usefulness, instead of her awareness, decides her worth and how long she lasts.

While the clones and Artificial Friends come from different origins and serve different purposes, both groups lack meaningful futures. One group is designed to die young, while the other is made to be easily replaceable. Ishiguro uses these limited lives to question how modern societies justify exploitation with medical, technological, and economic reasons. This article argues that Ishiguro's novels reveal the ethical issues of creating lives without futures and encourage readers to rethink the definitions of personhood and moral responsibility.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine how mortality and temporality function as mechanisms of control in *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun*.
- To analyze the ethical implications of biopolitical and technopolitical systems governing posthuman lives.
- To explore how engineered biological and artificial beings internalize limited futures and assigned social roles.
- To assess Ishiguro's critique of societies that depend on emotional labor while denying ethical recognition and futurity.



3. Need for the Study

With rapid advancements in biotechnology and artificial intelligence, questions about posthuman ethics have become more urgent. Literary texts offer a vital space to explore the social and moral effects of these changes. While *Never Let Me Go* has been widely discussed for its themes of cloning and bioethics, and *Klara and the Sun* has gained attention for its depiction of artificial intelligence, fewer studies have looked at both novels together as part of a single ethical inquiry.

This comparative study is important because it shows how Ishiguro critiques systems that control life by managing time. Instead of using direct violence or rebellion, his novels illustrate how exploitation becomes accepted through education, care, and emotional connection. By focusing on uncertain futures, the study underscores how denying future-oriented agency acts as a significant yet often hidden form of domination. This perspective adds to broader discussions about posthumanism, ethics, and the politics of time in contemporary literature.

4. Data and Methodology

The study focuses on qualitative and interpretive aspects. The main data come from close readings of *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021). The analysis centers on narrative voice, characterization, representations of time, and ethical decision-making. Secondary sources include scholarly works on biopolitics, posthumanism, precarity, and temporality, especially writings by Michel Foucault, Rosi Braidotti, Lauren Berlant, and Sarah Sharma. These theoretical viewpoints offer tools to understand how power, ethics, and time connect in Ishiguro's novels.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Biopolitics and the Governance of Life

Biopolitics refers to modern power structures that manage life instead of just enforcing laws. This power works through institutions that oversee health, reproduction, and mortality. Biopolitical systems influence behavior through normalization and social expectations, rather than through violence.

In *Never Let Me Go*, cloning appears as an accepted medical practice. The bodies of clones are created, monitored, and ultimately dismantled for the benefit of others. Their deaths are portrayed as unfortunate but necessary for scientific progress. This system allows society to benefit from their sacrifice without facing the ethical questions it raises.



Klara and the Sun presents a similar type of governance based on technological capitalism. Artificial Friends exist within a market that assesses them based on efficiency, emotional responsiveness, and consumer demand. Control happens through replacement instead of termination, but the outcome is similar: lives are regarded as disposable.

5.2 Posthuman Ethics and Moral Recognition

Posthuman ethics questions human-centered moral views by focusing on relationships, vulnerability, and emotions as the foundation for ethical thought. From this viewpoint, moral value is not restricted to biological humans; it also includes beings that can care, remember, and make ethical choices.

Ishiguro's posthuman characters show these traits. Kathy's thoughtful narration, Tommy's emotional challenges, and Klara's loyalty illustrate moral awareness and duty. However, these characters are often denied ethical recognition. Their exclusion highlights the shortcomings of ethical systems that rely only on biological definitions of what it means to be human.

5.3 Temporality and Precarious Futurity

Time is shaped by society, not experienced the same way by everyone. Institutions and technologies influence how people think about and reach the future. When the future is limited, life becomes uncertain.

In Ishiguro's novels, time serves as a means of control. The clones' short lifespans and Klara's risk of becoming outdated show what can be called precarious futurity. This is a situation where lives are influenced by forced time limits that restrict self-determination.

6. Engineered Mortality in *Never Let Me Go*

Never Let Me Go shows a society where human cloning is accepted as a medical solution. Kathy H.'s calm and simple story gradually reveals that the students at Hailsham are meant to become organ donors. This slow revelation reflects how biopolitical power operates, promoting acceptance instead of resistance.

The education of the clones focuses on creativity, care, and emotional sensitivity. However, these activities serve more as means of control than as ways to empower individuals. Roles like "carer" and "donor" replace traditional dreams, changing fulfillment into obedience to social demands. The idea that



romantic love might lead to deferrals gives a glimmer of hope, but its eventual rejection highlights the certainty of their fate.

Even in their limited lives, the clones show emotional depth and moral understanding. Kathy's connection to her memories, Tommy's battle with anger and self-expression, and their desire for real relationships challenge the idea that they are merely biological resources. Ishiguro reveals a society that recognizes the clones as human but avoids taking ethical responsibility for their suffering.

7. Programmed Temporality in *Klara and the Sun*

Klara and the Sun shifts focus from biological exploitation to technological disposability. Klara's view of the world is shaped by her artificial design, leading to fragmented but focused observation. This focus helps her build a moral system based on care, belief, and responsibility. Her devotion to the Sun acts as a symbolic framework through which she understands healing and moral actions.

Unlike the clones, Klara is not programmed to die young. However, her future is threatened by the constant risk of becoming useless. Her worth relies on her emotional performance and ongoing usefulness. When Josie gets sick, the idea that Klara could take her place raises uncomfortable questions about substitution and emotional labor.

Klara's willingness to give herself up shows ethical awareness beyond simple programming. Yet humans view her actions as just functional rather than moral choices. Her eventual placement in the Yard mirrors the quiet resignation seen in *Never Let Me Go*, emphasizing Ishiguro's critique of societies that extract care while ignoring the future.

8. Comparative Discussion: Temporal Control and Ethical Marginalization

When read together, *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun* show how different systems, biomedical science and consumer technology, create similar vulnerabilities for posthuman beings. Although clones and Artificial Friends come from different processes, both exist within frameworks that define their worth in purely practical terms. Their lives matter to society only as long as they perform specific roles: supporting human health or providing emotional care. This practical approach leaves little space for independence or self-determined futures.

Time control is key to sustaining this hierarchy. In *Never Let Me Go*, time is biologically regulated through the donation cycle, ensuring that the clones' lives follow a predictable path toward termination.



In *Klara and the Sun*, time centers around technological value, with obsolescence always looming. In both stories, the future is restricted rather than unfolding organically. Ishiguro illustrates how different forms of power, biopolitical and technopolitical, lead to the same ethical result: lives that are valuable yet disposable.

Importantly, Ishiguro does not depict his posthuman characters as mere victims. Instead, their limited futures deepen their emotional and ethical connections with others. Kathy's focus on memory and Klara's care for Josie show that relationships can thrive under constraints. These emotions challenge the idea that ethical depth relies on freedom, longevity, or biological humanity. By emphasizing relational responsibility, Ishiguro questions ethical systems that assess value based on productivity rather than the ability to care.

9. Ethical Recognition Beyond the Human

A major issue raised by both novels is that current ethical and legal systems do not address posthuman life well. Human rights discussions usually depend on the idea of the human, leaving out beings like clones and Artificial Friends. Even though these characters show emotional depth and moral understanding, they exist in a legal and ethical void.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are not legally recognized. This lets society take advantage of their sacrifices without facing the moral consequences. Their education and humane treatment give the illusion of ethical concern but hide a pattern of exploitation. In *Klara and the Sun*, Klara's disposability is seen through a market perspective. Her replacement is not viewed as a moral failure but rather as a normal outcome of technology moving forward.

Both novels argue that denying someone a future is a significant form of ethical harm. Creating a being without a future—or one where the future can be taken away at any time—means denying them full moral status. Ishiguro presents ethics as a question of time: who gets to envision a future, and who is left out of that chance? By connecting ethics to time, the novels urge for moral systems that go beyond just biological definitions of personhood.

10. Posthuman Responsibility in Contemporary Contexts



Ishiguro's posthuman stories connect deeply with current discussions about biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and automation. Advances in genetic engineering, machine learning, and affective computing increasingly blur the lines between human and nonhuman agents. As societies rely more on technology for both physical and emotional tasks, the ethical issues raised by Ishiguro's novels become more urgent.

Klara and the Sun particularly highlights fears about emotional outsourcing and technological companionship. Klara's role anticipates a future where care is more often handed over to artificial beings, leading to worries about responsibility, attachment, and disposability. Similarly, *Never Let Me Go* reflects ongoing ethical discussions about medical exploitation, consent, and the commercialization of bodies.

By showcasing posthuman characters capable of loyalty, sacrifice, and moral reasoning, Ishiguro encourages readers to reflect on their ethical duties toward new forms of life. His novels suggest that moral responsibility should be based not on origin or usefulness but on the ability to feel, care, and connect with others.

Conclusion

Through *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun*, Kazuo Ishiguro offers a strong critique of modern systems that control life through time management. Whether through biologically engineered mortality or technology-driven obsolescence, posthuman beings lack meaningful access to the future. These limitations show the ethical costs of systems that prioritize efficiency, progress, and practicality over care and responsibility.

Ishiguro's novels ultimately ask for a broader ethical imagination. This imagination needs to recognize vulnerability, emotional depth, and moral agency across human and posthuman lines. By connecting ethics to the future, his work challenges societies to rethink how they define personhood and which lives deserve protection. In doing so, Ishiguro highlights the urgent moral need to acknowledge and protect the futures of all sentient beings, no matter their biological or technological backgrounds.



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